M+ The moment I realised a bottle of wine a night ISN'T normal, and as I hit middle age, I was totally dependent on alcohol

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Home alone, I had polished off two bottles of white wine before falling into a deep, intoxicated sleep. But then I woke at 2am, with bile rising in my throat.

Miraculously, I made it to the bathroom where I vomited – stomach acid mixed with bright red blood.

Getting rid of the **alcohol**, which had been poisoning my system, brought familiar relief – I have spent decades drinking at least a bottle of wine a night, and, shockingly, on nights out with 'the girls', as many as three – so am no stranger to being sick.

However, the appearance of that bright red blood, two years ago, was both new and alarming. You might expect it would have led me, then aged 53, finally to address my deeply unhealthy relationship with alcohol.

However, you would be wrong. Although thoughts of what might be the cause of it – a stomach ulcer? A rupture of something internal? **Cancer**? – haunted my sleep, come 6pm the following day I never paused before opening another bottle of sauvignon blanc and pouring myself a glass.

I now believe that people, like me, who become alcohol-dependent – as a highly successful IT manager with a lovely husband and home, I don't identify with the term alcoholic – can be deluded about their drinking habits.



Leisel had spent decades drinking at least a bottle of wine a night and initially didn't stop when she saw blood in her vomit



Leisel quit drinking after finding an online article on ways simply to reduce alcohol consumption

If I became anxious about the impact it might be having, I would simply open another bottle and pour glass after glass, until I was too drunk to think. I never went to my GP, too anxious about being cross-examined on the extent of my intake, nor even mentioned it to my near-teetotal husband Clive, deeply ashamed to be drinking to the point of vomiting in my 50s.

Instead, I just came to expect that splash of red when I was sick, as inevitable a part of drinking as a hangover.

That is until one Monday morning in April this year when I woke to discover I had nearly finished an entire box of wine, containing the equivalent of four bottles.

While in denial about my dependency, I had recently switched from bottles to boxes because it was easier to hide how much I was drinking – and cardboard doesn't clink in the recycling bin, alerting the neighbours, on collection day.

We'd had relatives over to our home in Ipswich, Suffolk, for Sunday lunch, and, aside from the one glass I had poured for a guest, I had drunk the lot. As my head pounded and waves of nausea gripped my gut, I realised even I could no longer kid myself about the extent of my problem.

Taking myself back to bed, something I would never usually do, I sobbed into my pillow, knowing I had crossed a new line and had to get control.



The IT manager came close to losing her job when she was found asleep, head on desk, after a particularly boozy lunch

However, I still didn't want to discuss it with Clive until I had figured out a solution.

I was terrified at the prospect of having to quit altogether. Without alcohol, how would I ever have fun? Unwind? Celebrate?

So I began searching online for ways simply to reduce my consumption. After a Google search for 'how to drink less' brought up an article about a professional woman like me who had overcome a dependency on alcohol through a sober coaching programme, Just The Tonic Coaching, I had a look at the website.

It wasn't cheap, but then neither was my wine habit – and what appealed most to me was that it was about 'getting control' of drinking, rather than quitting altogether, which was way too scary a prospect at that stage.

Through one-to-one and group coaching, both delivered online, you learn about the impact of alcohol on the body and brain, and our subconscious beliefs about it.

The support from both coaches and others who are also stopping or cutting down is invaluable.

It is run by former corporate high-flyer Sandra Parker and its members are all professionals – from barristers to doctors – who, like me, have developed an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, leading to a psychological, rather than physical, dependency on it.

I was a few weeks into the three-month programme when Sandra mentioned that, after around eight weeks of coaching, I would be asked to do a 30-day sober challenge. If I'd known about this at the start, I might have run scared. However, by then I had considerably cut down to a couple of glasses, rather than bottles, and was having two alcohol-free days a week.

At 6pm, when I would usually be popping a cork, I would turn on my favourite music and dance, or run a bath and read my book while having a soak.

Afterwards, I would notice that the urge had passed, which all pointed towards it being a habit I associated with that point in the day, just as Sandra had said it was.

My drinking had not been that controlled in 40 years, having developed a taste for red wine while working in a local pub run by Italians at the tender age of 15.

Although always a career woman, in financial IT for banking and insurance firms, I spent my teens and 20s boozing while clubbing and even on nights in, with friends, in Colchester, Essex.

Throughout my 30s, I commuted into London, where I worked in managerial roles in the City, taking full advantage of the drinking culture. Incredibly, like many high-functioning drink dependents, it did not impact on my career as I still managed to meet deadlines and excel, even with a hangover.

However, I came close to losing my job once, when I was found asleep, head on desk, after a particularly boozy lunch.

But I convinced the HR manager it only happened because I was having some difficulties in my private life and she believed me, so no further action was taken.

In fact, I left that role after being offered a better one soon afterwards.

For over a decade, I would go out drinking after work and get the 'vomit comet' – the late-night train from London to Colchester – home. On countless occasions, I fell asleep, missing my stop, and would have to get a taxi from wherever I ended up.

One unforgettable time, when I was 40, I came around alone in a carriage in complete darkness in the sidings at Norwich train station, an hour and a half from home.

I woke as the female driver slammed her door and, mercifully, spotted me moving around. It was 1am and I was in such a panic, sitting alone, confused, in the dark. Tearful, and ashamed, I told her I was meant to get off at Colchester and she said: 'Well, I've just been told I need to take this train to Ipswich so I can drop you back.

'However, I'm not supposed to have any passengers on board, so the lights will stay off and you'll need to keep your head down.'

I was so embarrassed when she had to wake me, from a drunken slumber, once we arrived back in Colchester.

Although colleagues and friends never spoke to me about my drinking, and I was single until I met Clive ten years ago, my parents worried about me.

I remember calling my mum – my parents lived in a small town about 15 miles away from me – one winter's night, on my way home, while sitting on a bench, outside Colchester station, when I was in my early 40s. After ending the call, at about 11pm, I must have fallen asleep.

I woke half an hour later, covered in snow, to the sound of my phone ringing. It was my mum, anxious because I said I would message to let her know when I was home.

But I am ashamed to say that when they tried to talk to me about their concerns, I would shut them down, saying: 'You don't know what you're talking about. Everybody has a drink. My health is fine, and all you make me do is want to go and pour a glass of wine when you get on at me.'

I met Clive – we've been married for seven years now – on a golfing holiday, where he was drinking more than he usually would.

I remember, once we returned to normal life, him telling me he didn't really like the taste or effect of alcohol, so he could take it or leave it.

I was shocked but relieved that he never really commented on my drinking in the early years.

He was also always happy to drive when we went out, which suited me fine.

Around that time, I changed jobs to a role in which I can work from home, and we settled in Ipswich. You might imagine this would have curbed my alcohol intake. However, all it meant was that, instead of socialising with colleagues, I did most of my drinking at home.

In fact, I went from drinking a bottle of wine a night to opening a second.

Clive is out four nights a week – he plays crib, poker, darts and snooker with friends – so most of the time, as we have no children, I would drink alone.

He's very easygoing and didn't nag me about my drinking, though he does say now that he never knew who he would be coming home to: Sleepy Leisel, who wanted attention, or my wild alter ego, who would want to go dancing.

As I did a lot of my drinking alone, when Clive was out or in bed, he wasn't fully aware of the extent of it.

However, on a couple of occasions, when I was panicking about the extent of my drinking, I talked to him about trying to cut down. He was very supportive and made good suggestions.

But then, whenever I reached for a second bottle and he asked if I hadn't already had enough, I regretted being so open.

I would get defensive – quiet and moody – if anyone, especially Clive, suggested I had an issue.

He has since told me that this led to him avoiding making any comment at all. Of course, my drinking put a strain on our relationship.

In fact, two years ago I left Clive and went to stay in a country hotel. It was a decision I made while drunk and stubbornly followed through with when sober.

I told him I was tired of him speaking to me like a child and that he was no fun.

I came home, with my tail between my legs, after four days, having really missed him – blaming the menopause for my meltdown.

Looking back, I realise how difficult it must have been for him, living with someone who was drunk every night, forgetting and forever repeating myself.

For all these reasons, at the end of the 30-day sobriety challenge, far from feeling bored or that I was missing out, I realised how much happier I am without alcohol.

I didn't experience any withdrawal symptoms, though I kept up the dancing and baths after finishing work.

However, used to pretty much blacking out in bed, it was tough getting to sleep without alcohol in the early weeks.

Once the cravings and sleep issues were under control, this pink cloud, a term used in recovery circles to describe the intense euphoria and optimism that comes with the early stages of sobriety, descended.

You would have thought I was on something. Nothing could touch me. Life was so blissful and fluffy and wonderful, and I was full of joy and energy.

I still go out with friends – my best friend has been sober for years and when I told my other friends not to curb their drinking in front of me, they said: 'Leisel, we only ever drank so much because you were forever topping up our glasses.'

My marriage is also so much better now I'm sober. Clive and I enjoy doing things together, going for walks and watching films that I can actually remember the following day.

How was it possible for me to reach this point, in a few months, after decades of relying on alcohol to drown my sorrows and lift my spirits? After the Just The Tonic programme, whenever I craved a drink, I learned to tune into my body and consider whether I was hungry, angry, lonely or tired (HALT), all feelings which can lead us to reach for a drink.

Even while cutting back, I felt so much better – I had more energy, was less irritable and lost weight, well over a stone in six months.

Without the binges, I was no longer waking up to vomit either. Although I have never mentioned the blood in my bile to my GP, nor was I experiencing any abdominal discomfort – something I often felt when being sick – that might indicate a physical problem.

I have private health insurance, through my employer, and have annual checks.

In the past, I was always terrified beforehand that they would reveal the toll that alcohol must have been taking on my body. However, incredibly, my liver and kidney function were always within normal ranges, and I would tell myself that meant I couldn't be drinking too much.

I didn't make the link between my sky-high blood pressure, for which I was prescribed medication, and my drinking, convincing myself that was down to my age, my weight – I'd always been a size 16-18 and am now a size 14 – and the stress of my career.

But, at my last health check, four months after stopping drinking, it had come so far down I was taken off blood pressure medication. I was planning to retire in February, blaming the menopause for the brain fog, lethargy and bloating that were my constant companions, when, really, I was either hungover or drunk.

Having worked hard and paid into pensions, I could, just about, afford to do so.

However, sober, I have a new lease of life and lots of energy to keep working, something I do enjoy, for another few years.

I've decided to share my story because I know there are lots of midlife women out there who don't consider themselves to be alcohol dependent but for whom wine has become a crutch they struggle to imagine going without. They think that life will be duller, harder and lacking in rewards without it.

In fact, the very opposite is true. It's richer, easier and full of unexpected joy, which is why I've also been able to wean myself off the antidepressants I've been taking for years.

And if I, after 40 years of dependency, can live happily without it, you can, too.

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As told to Helen Carroll